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AUTHOR Marcus, Sybil
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ABSTRACT

The structure of an 8-week intensive course in literature for advanced learners of English as a Second Language is described. Focus is on engaging student interest with texts rich in theme and/or language that can elicit thoughtful discussion. In the first 2 weeks, the language and length of the texts (short stories) selected make them relatively easy to read, but the themes are of interest to students. Emphasis during this phase is on building student confidence and creating familiarity with figures of speech. The first work read is seen as crucial to engaging the students, and should be easy enough to be digested in class. In the second, 4-week stage, longer stories are used, and some poetry may be introduced. The third stage is characterized by study of a full-length play, which can be as substantial as a novel but easier to read in dialogue form. Two suggested curricula are appended, each listing literary works to be taught, with brief synopses and ideas for class activities and discussion. (MSE)

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How to Plan a Literature Course for Maximum Effect

TESOL 1996

Presented by Sybil Marcus
English Language Program
U.C. Berkeley, Extension

In this paper I hope to show how the judicious planning of a literature course can contribute in large measure to its success. Before beginning, let me fill you in on where I teach and the kinds of students I have. I work in the English Language Program at UC Berkeley Extension. We are an intensive program with students from all over the world who come to us for eight-week sessions. Many of our students plan on entering U.S. universities or are here to learn English for their professional advancement back home. I teach upper level students, which translates into their having a TOEFL score of about 500 at the lower level and 600 and above at the higher end. I usually teach a literature course which is an elective class, and an upper level fluency class in which literature sometimes plays a paramount role while at other times it occupies an adjunct position. At any event, I never get through an eight-week period without exposing my students to the joy of studying literature. My lessons are two hours long and we meet between two to three times a week.

I have to admit up front that I am a zealous proponent of using literature for all manner of language advancement. I believe its usefulness as a reading tool is self-evident, but I am also convinced that literature can and should be used to advance oral and language skills in a variety of ways. I have found that analyzing literature stimulates students, who respond to the challenge of a well thought-out text with interest and sensitivity. They quickly understand that they can not only learn valuable lessons about language, but perhaps equally importantly, about life as well.

Although I teach an eight-week course, the criteria I use can be adapted to fit courses that may run for as long as a year and can be used for intermediate-level students as well as those at the upper level. Because my courses are relatively short I rely exclusively on short stories, poems and plays. I'd love to teach a novel, but I feel that the time constraints I operate under limit me more fruitfully to the other genres. I also tend to exclude essays although I have had success with George Orwell's wonderfully satirical "Shooting an Elephant".

Since only a few of my students are literature majors in either English or their native language, I view my first task as having to hook the students in the very first lesson with the excitement of studying literature. This is crucial because once you've persuaded them that literature is going to be an interesting and productive study for them, you can reel them in with any number of texts in the later weeks. The short story dominates my course and I must tell you that for me the most difficult and daunting aspect over the nine years I have been doing this has been finding the "right"

short stories. These are texts that are sufficiently rich in theme and/or language as to elicit thoughtful discussion. I try to find stories of varying subject matter, length, complexity and levels of seriousness. The latter is particularly important as it is all too easy to drown the students in the great tragic themes. They need humor and irony as well. And my task is most daunting when it comes to finding humorous themes that can carry the weight of intensive scrutiny and analysis. I frequently read as many as 50 stories before finding one, be it serious or humorous, that I feel I can use in class. That is not to say that I don't like the other 49 stories - frequently I do - but I have discovered that there is a world of difference between liking a story and being able to fill a substantial block of time with a discussion about it. I also search out only stories written originally in English. I never use translations no matter how effective they are because I want to expose the students to the voluminous reservoir of English-language literature that is at their disposal. Incidentally, if any of you have a layered story, particularly a humorous one, that has worked well for you, I should love to hear about it at the end of this talk.

I usually think of my course as being divided into three parts: the first two weeks, the middle four weeks, and the final two weeks. Naturally, any divisions you might make will depend on the length of your particular course. As I have said the first lesson is potentially the most critical of all. Therefore, I almost always start with a story that is short, colorful, usually not too introspective, and not too difficult. Yet it must fulfil the crucial demand of being meaty enough to engage the students' interest and imagination. To this end stories by Hemingway, Carver, and other minimalist writers frequently fit the bill. Since I have not met the students I need a story for the first lesson which can be read and digested in class. (As an aside let me say that after the first lesson I always tell the students they need to read each story twice for homework - once to grasp the essentials of plot and language, and the second time to grapple with the thematic concerns of the story.) With writers like Hemingway and Carver the language may be easy, but it is fun to show the students how rich and complex the subtext is. A Hemingway story that gives itself to a first lesson is his First World War story aptly titled "A Very Short Story". Although it is only a page long, it is packed with drama and shifting emotions as it examines an archetypal fleeting wartime romance. I also have a superbly ironic one-page story called "Can-Can" by Arturo Vivante, which encapsulates the triple themes of adultery, crossed expectations within marriage, and the danger of getting what you secretly long for, all within one page. Another writer I like to study in the first week or so is the New Zealand author Janet Frame (Some of you may have seen the movie of her life "An Angel at my Table") and I have successfully used her story, "You Are Now Entering the Human Heart", a poignant tale of fear centered on the primevally unnerving image of a snake. So, for the first two weeks I concentrate on building the students' confidence in themselves as appreciators of literature by keeping the story short, with language and theme that is not over dense, and I use the time to instill in them a knowledge of such figures of speech as imagery, metaphor, simile, symbol, etc. which they will need to enjoy and understand the more complex texts that await them in the middle four weeks of the course.

By the beginning of the third week, which is the start of the second stage of the course, the students are usually amazed at how deeply satisfying it is to delve into a well-written and thought-provoking story and are ready for the greater challenges that await them. I now feel able to introduce them to longer stories (that is between four to ten pages) by classic writers such as D.H.Lawrence whose story,"The Rocking-Horse Winner", is about the tragic origins and consequences of a boy's obsession with buying his mother's love; James Joyce's "Eveline", (a very accessible Joycean story, which is a psychological study of a young woman's conflicting feelings as she struggles to escape her tyrannical father); Katherine Mansfield's "Miss Brill", a moving story about the attempt of a lonely, aging woman to create meaning to her life; the contemporary American writer, Anne Tyler, whose "Teenage Wasteland" delineates the torments of being a rebellious teenager - something most young students readily relate to; Frank O'Connor, whose luminously humorous "My Oedipus Complex" is a sure-fire winner; Woody Allen, who has written a slew of very funny short stories, the best of which is in my opinion "The Kugelmass Episode", a hilarious parody of Madam Bovary, (this story invites using an accompanying Woody Allen movie and I have found "Oedipus Wrecks", the first segment of *New York Stories* is perfect for this); James Thurber, whose short stories like "The Catbird Seat" and "The Secret Life of Walter Mitty" are like Chaplin movies with the pathos always lurking beneath the humorous surface; Alice Walker's "Everyday Use for My Grandmama", which is a fascinating dissection of the problems of deracination - something that every foreign student can relate to - as well as a probing look at the complexity of family relations; the South African Nobel Prize Laureate, Nadine Gordimer, whose stories like "The Intruder" and "Six Feet of the Country" I particularly love for their intensity and unflinching honesty; and even a writer with a syntax and subject matter as complex as Faulkner (I have done "Dry September, Barn Burning", and "A Rose for Miss Emily" at the culmination of the sixth week).

The above list of authors and stories is but a sample of what my students are ready and willing to tackle after only a few weeks' preparation. The key is to challenge without terrifying. Where possible, I like to give them a glossary to help with the more mechanical but necessary job of understanding the difficult vocabulary or specific cultural references, and in a perfect world I would do that all the time. But I am not always organized enough to do this and even when they have to cope on their own, for the most part they manage quite well. I actively discourage them from sitting and looking up every word they don't know. That is the quickest way to burn-out I can think of. Instead I stress they should look up only the words that are crucial to their understanding of the meaning and I invariably spend about 10 minutes of the lesson, helping them with any vocabulary, cultural references, or lexical problems they may have encountered in a glossed or unglossed story.

It is during this second stage which usually lasts about four weeks that I may introduce poetry to

the class. I have to confess that I do not do a great deal of poetry, partly because in my experience non-native students are frequently more intimidated by the densely figurative language of poetry than they are by the figurative language of prose, and partly because in eight weeks I simply don't have the time to cover all the aspects of literature that I'd like to. But when I do use poetry I try to relate it to a theme we've discussed in a short story. So I might do some war poetry of which there is a huge amount to choose from if we do a war story, or I might read the D H Lawrence poem "Snake" in conjunction with the Janet Frame story I mentioned earlier. I have found that when I read aloud a poem like "Snake" to my students they quickly respond to its evocative imagery and alliterative onomatopoeia. I have also done some of Gwendolyne Brooks's and Maya Angelou's poems in conjunction with stories by black writers. And when reading about love I've eagerly introduced students to Shakespeare via his sonnets such as "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer's Day?"

At the beginning of the seventh week we always study a full-length play in my literature class. By this relatively late stage I want my literature students to reap the satisfaction of reading and thinking about a full-length work of literature and I have discovered that a play works very well in this capacity. It is less daunting than a novel, since although it may be just as long, and deal with themes equally as complex, it is easier to read in its dialogue form. I usually divide the play into four parts and we read each part for homework, then discuss the important elements, such as theme, setting, dramatic development, and characterization - to name but a few - before going on to the fun of playreading to make the whole venture come alive. I always stress that the playreading is voluntary and that anyone who feels uncomfortable is not obliged to read. However, in all the years I have never had a single student opt out. In fact, I have discovered many an actor manque amongst the students and we more often than not end up with a wonderfully spirited reading of the play. The icing on the cake comes if I can find a filmed version of the work which is faithful to both the text and the spirit of the play. Some of the plays we've studied include Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* and his very naturalistic play *All My Sons*, both of which have magnificent renderings on video, the former starring Dustin Hoffman and John Malkevitch, and the latter having Aidan Quinn in a leading role. I also like to do Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *The Glass Managerie*, and again one can find exquisite films. The Marlon Brando/Vivian Leigh version of *Streetcar* immediately springs to mind and there is a very good rendering of *The Glass Menagerie* directed by Paul Newman and starring his wife Joanne Woodward and once again John Malkevitch. I am a great devotee of the South African playwright, Athol Fugard, and have done several of his works with my classes, including *Master Harold and the Boys* and *The Road to Mecca*. About two years ago I saw his (then) latest play *Playland* which I plan on trying with a class soon. Another play I've done with some success is Sam Shepard's intriguing,allegorical work *A Lie of the Mind*.

By the time the eighth week is over we have done anything between 10 - 13 short stories, a few

poems, and a full-length play. The students have been exposed to a wide sweep of writers, both classical and contemporary, and have encountered a variety of themes which have engendered much heated discussion. All the stories I have adumbrated here are sufficiently meaty as to elicit a lot of personal comments as students quickly identify predicaments in their own lives with those of the characters they have read and thought deeply about. The beauty of using literature is that you have lots of leeway as to how you conduct a class. Sometimes you can concentrate on the literary aspects of the story, at other times you might want to look closely at the writing style in order to help students gain mastery over specific aspects of writing, while at still other times you might want to spur cross-cultural debate, using the literary text as a jumping off point only for an extended discussion on contemporary and personal issues. Then there is always the opportunity of illustrating and practicing grammar points that are well demonstrated in the context of a story. And finally, each and every story will yield new vocabulary - again in helpfully memorable context - which students will absorb into their passive knowledge and which, with practice and repetition, they can put into active use as well. Not infrequently, students who are obsessed with getting good TOEFL results tell me they have expanded their vocabulary most helpfully via their extensive literature reading.

If you turn to the handout you have, you will see that I have created two complete eight-week courses consisting of 16 two-hour lessons that embody the principles I have expressed to you. Each proposed story has a capsule comment on its major theme, as well as pointers on how to use the work effectively. At this point, may I say that if you get the feeling that you have perhaps seen a number of these stories already gathered together in an anthology, let me state preemptively that I have not plundered somebody else's work, but rather that last year I brought out a literature textbook called ***A World of Fiction***, published by Addison-Wesley (1995), which contains fifteen of these suggested stories and you may have already seen it or better yet used it!

This concludes my talk, so I should like to thank you for your attention and say that I should be delighted to field any questions, hear any comments or suggestions from you, and elaborate on anything that is in the handout.

Sybil Marcus
English Language Program
University of California
Berkeley Extension
1995 University Avenue #7022
Berkeley,CA 94720
Telephone (510) 642-9833

How to Plan a Literature Course for Maximum Effect Sybil Marcus
Suggested Curriculum A

Note: 7 of the following stories may be found in ***A World of Fiction*** by Sybil Marcus, published by Addison-Wesley (1995).

Week one

Can Can by Arturo Vivante

This two-page story is centered on adultery and makes good use of irony. It is a wonderful story with which to begin a course as students have a lot to say about the often stereotypical expectations of men and women in marriage, and they like to exchange information regarding the attitudes towards adultery in their country.

Noel by Michael Plemmons

This one-page story is about the commercialization of Christmas with the ironic twist that it is children who are being exploited and treated as tradable goods. Its theme provokes plenty of lively discussion.

The Model by Bernard Melamud

A three-and-a-half-page story that deals with the loneliness of old age and examines the misunderstandings that result between an old man and the artist's model he hires. This story provokes reflective discussions on what it is like to be old in various cultures.

Week two

Carnation by Katherine Mansfield

A two-page story about the awakening sexuality of young school girls. It is a good story with which to begin the introduction of imagery as it is all atmosphere and the descriptions are rich in adjectives, metaphors and similes. Students often like to try their own hand at descriptive writing after reading this story.

You Are Now Entering The Human Heart by Janet Frame

A two-and-a-half-page story in which a teacher's terror of snakes is unwillingly revealed to her young class. This story elicits much discussion about individual fears. I like to do D H Lawrence's poem "Snake" in conjunction with this story as it also taps into our deepest, instinctual fear of snakes.

Mother by Grace Paley

Although this story is only one page long it is quite complex and has the density of a poem. It is told by a narrator who is looking back on his/her relationship with his/her mother when a teenager and has the usual ingredients of the troubled parent/child connection at this age. Since the writer uses flashbacks, it stimulates discussion about the effectiveness of this technique and invites comparisons with movies that rely on flashbacks to make their point.

Week three

The Legacy by Virginia Woolf

This is a very accessible longer story (six pages) about how a husband slowly and unwillingly comes to see that his marriage, which he had always assumed to be perfect, had in fact been crumbling for some time. He discovers that his wife had even taken a lover from whom she was so unwilling to be parted that a double suicide was the only way out. The story unwinds through the husband's thoroughly self-absorbed eyes and illustrates wonderfully the concept of point of view. It is one of my students' favorite stories.

I Spy by Graham Greene

Although this is a short (two-page) story, it is quite complex and deals with a child's growing awareness that his relationship with his parents is not what he has always taken it for granted to be. This revelation comes to him via a quite complex plot that involves his father's being arrested for spying while he is at that very moment spying on his father - a neat ironic twist.

Crimes of Conscience by Nadine Gordimer

I like to pair this three-page story with the Graham Greene because it too deals with spying but in a very different way. (I have found with Gordimer's stories that it is often helpful to give students an idea of life in pre-apartheid South Africa so that they can understand better the political climate of the story.) The topic of spying is rich soil for introspection and analysis.

Week four

The Catbird Seat by James Thurber

This is a brilliantly conceived seven-page story embodying all the Thurber elements of the downtrodden little man who gets his revenge on the overpowering woman who threatens his job. The story is very funny, but at the same time invites discussion on the way Thurber portrays the gender war and his prejudiced portrayal of a strong woman. By this point the students welcome the comic relief after the seriousness of several of the previous stories.

In Another Country by Ernest Hemingway

Hemingway's laconic writing in this four-page story provides quite a contrast to the ornate style of Thurber. This is a war story in which the characters have only their war wounds in common. War stories in general generate a great deal of heated cross-cultural discussion. I may do any number of war poems - ranging from Wilfred Owen to Allen Ginsburg - in connection with this piece.

Week five

Everyday Use for your grandmama by Alice Walker

This five-page story is a complex, interesting, and at times humorous examination of what it means to lose your roots. It also looks at the shifting dynamics of family relationships and is told through a first-person narrator.

The Rocking-Horse Winner by D H Lawrence

In this twelve-page story Lawrence deals with the nature of obsession and what it does to a child who desperately seeks to buy his mother's love. Many students easily identify with a tendency to compulsiveness and there is often animated discussion on this theme.

Week six

Dry September by William Faulkner

By now students are ready to tackle the formidable Faulkner. I may devote two lessons to this ten-page story in which the lynching of an innocent black man moves inexorably towards its hideous climax. Faulkner's probing into the psychology of mob action gives rise to thoughtful discussions about the nature of personal courage. The story is also a magnificent exemplar of how atmosphere can be used to heighten the thematic content. In a wider context, this reading offers us an opportunity to explore racism and other biases in students' native countries.

Weeks seven and eight

Death of a Salesman or *All My Sons* by Arthur Miller

Either play gives itself to a close study and a playreading. In addition, there is a good movie of each play to round off the session.

Suggested Curriculum B

Note: 8 of the following stories may be found in ***A World of Fiction*** by Sybil Marcus, published by Addison-Wesley (1995).

Week one

A Very Short Story by Ernest Hemingway

This one-page story, which deals with a brief love affair in wartorn Europe is an excellent starter to the course. Its tone is coolly detatched and the style is vintage Hemingway. The students relate to the theme as well as to the writing.

Popular Mechanics by Raymond Carver

I like to do this one-and-a-half-page story in conjunction with the Hemingway. Its story of marital discord with its appalling ending grips the students' imaginations. They appreciate the minimalist technique Carver excels in and find satisfaction in reading between the lines. (Almost any story of Carver works well and I have used a number of others successfully.)

Story of an Hour by Kate Chopin

The style of this two-page story of an unhappy marriage contrasts well with the Hemingway and Carver pieces. Although written at the end of the nineteenth century, its heroine, with her longing for freedom from the entrapment of marriage, is a thoroughly modern figure. The story is rich in imagery and serves as an excellent introduction to simile, metaphor, and personification.

Week two

Eveline by James Joyce

This two-and-a-half-page story by James Joyce is quite accessible. Students feel amazed that so soon into the course they are tackling one of the great masters of the language. Its theme of a young girl torn between loyalty to her tyrannical father and to her fiance, who offers her freedom, resonates with many students and the discussions are always lively as to what she should have done under the circumstances.

A Short Digest of a Long Novel by Budd Schulberg

This unusual three-page story about a father's overly intense attachment to his baby daughter strikes a personal chord with students. This is another piece I like to use to explore the effective use of imagery in writing

Week three

Like a Winding Sheet by Ann Petry

Although eight pages long this story is compellingly readable as it traces one day in the life of a black factory worker in Harlem. The rising tension in the man who is subject to real and perceived racial insults is palpable and the reader knows that the day must end in tragedy. Its twin themes of racial injustice and the inhumanity of factory working conditions remain as relevant today as when the story was written in the 1940s. Any number of poems dealing with racism or with the mechanistic elements of contemporary life can be studied with this story.

Disappearing by Monica Wood

This three-page psychological story revolves round the obsessive goal of an obese woman to disappear through swimming. It is a fascinating study into the makeup of a complex woman who learns to assert herself as she gains confidence in the water. The writing is tantalizingly elliptical and I usually set aside time to go through the story line by line so that the students understand exactly what has been left out in nearly every sentence. Since weight in particular and obsession in general is a topic that students easily relate to, the discussions are often very animated.

Week four

The Kugelmass Episode by Woody Allen

By now we are more than ready for some light relief, which Woody Allen wittily provides in this brilliant nine-and-a-half-page parody of *Madame Bovary*. Even students who declare they don't find his movies funny are quickly won over by this story. (Allen has written a number of very funny stories, most of which work well with my students.) I also show the Woody Allen section in *New York Stories* called "Oedipus Wrecks" in conjunction with this piece. In this way students get to appreciate his visual and verbal pyrotechnics.

Teenage Wasteland by Anne Tyler

This desolate eight-and-a-half-page story about the rapid descent of a teenager into irremediable misery and trouble is again a story that students feel strongly about. There are lively discussions about who is to blame for the boy's misfortunes and whether they might have been avoided. I like to do the poem *We Real Cool* by Gwendolyn Brooks as a complement to this story.

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Week five

The Intruder by Nadine Gordimer

In four-and-a-half pages Nadine Gordimer poses some puzzling and intriguing questions: What exactly happened when a young couple's home gets trashed one night? Who did it? Why? There is more than one possible answer to this conundrum and students spend the lesson arguing passionately in favor of their answer In this way themes get untangled and the psychological underpinnings of this complex story are revealed.

My Oedipus Complex by Frank O'Connor

This charming and funny nine-page story about a boy's complicated feelings of love for his mother and jealousy of his recently returned soldier father never fails to delight. Students laugh out loud at the comic musings of the child and delight in the clever way the author uses the child as narrator. A teacher can do a lot with the concept of tone in this piece.

Week six

The Swimmer by John Cheever

I often spend two lessons on this ten-page story in which Cheever takes his protagonist on a mythical journey of discovery and in so doing peels away the hypocritical layers of the upper middle class. The story is multi-layered and can be approached both literally and symbolically. With its virtual absence of dialogue the writing can look intimidating to students, which is why I spend two lessons on it, showing how each leg of the journey reveals much about the protagonist and about the society Cheever is satirizing.

Weeks seven and eight

I might do a play by the South African playwright, Athol Fugard, such as *Master Harold and the Boys* or a classic by Tennessee Williams such as *The Glass Menagerie* of which there is a good movie version, or I might opt for a more contemporary American play like Sam Shepard's *A Lie of the Mind*. I have also done the British playwright, Peter Shaffer's dramatic play *Equus* with quite a bit of success. This work also has a superb movie rendering with Richard Burton in the leading role.